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Representations of Native Americans in Media

Educating Native America:
Breaking Down Barriers for Native Americans in Education

Education is often seen as the most effective way of shaping the future of society. Unfortunately, classrooms are often constructed in a way that enables the success of some groups over others. According to a study done in 2010 by the National Center for Education, 83% of all EuroAmerican students graduate high school in four years, whereas only 69% of Native American students graduate in four years. Out of all minority groups, Indians have the lowest rate of graduation besides African Americans (Sable & Stillwell, 2013). Our paper will investigate why the graduation rate of Native Americans is lower than that of other groups, and propose ways to enable the success of Native Americans in the classroom. We feel practices that would increase the quality of education for Indian students could be used in the broader sense to enable the success of minority groups as a whole.

First, we will look at a few key problems that may limit the success of the Native students. The first key element we have identified is the internalized racism that has existed throughout the history of educating Native students. We will then investigate how Native Americans are represented in teaching materials and how that representation can lead to identity confusion for students. Lastly, we will focus on the lack of Native teachers as a whole and the misunderstandings of non-Native students that can prohibit the success of Indian children in the classroom.

It becomes very apparent just how dark the history of educating Native Americans is when looking at Indian boarding schools. Native students were taken from their reservations and brought to schools hundreds of miles away from home to attend boarding schools. The title of Ward Churchill's book puts the underlying mission of these boarding schools perfectly—"Kill the Indian, Save the Man." Experiences at boarding schools were often very traumatic. For example, students were required to cut their long hair and sport a shorter, European hairstyle. They were also punished for speaking in their Native tongue (Haig-Brown, 1998).

Boarding schools have had a lasting effect on Native American communities. Although, much has changed since then, the effects of these practices still linger today. It can be argued that rather than trying to fully understand the differences of Indian students, EuroAmericans are either still trying to assimilate Indian students or have given up on them instead. According to a study by Donna Dehyle, "many Anglos expressed their perceptions of Indians as lazy, unmotivated, undependable workers who had drinking problems and who were irresponsible and uncaring parents." In her study, one teacher expressed that because "Whites" sometimes think that Natives are dumb, Natives students may act dumb because that is what is expected of them. When looking at the numbers, it is clear that certain groups of students have an advantage over others. The stigma that certain students cannot be successful because of their ethnic and cultural background puts these students at a considerable disadvantage (Dehyle, 1992).

In the classroom, Native Americans are often portrayed in a negative light and are subjected to discrimination. For example, there are many books about learning the ABCs or learning how to count that objectify natives. More specifically, these books contain phrases

such as, “E” is for Eskimo and “I” is for Indian. Certain songs taught to students also objectify Natives, such as, “10 Little Indians.” These teaching tools dehumanize Indians and Alaskan Natives because they are equated to apples, balls, and cats. It is interesting to note that no other ethnic groups are subjected to this kind of treatment. The reason behind this objectification could be explained by the long history of EuroAmericans using Natives in a way to further their own needs (Seale, 1998). Often, Natives were seen as a means to an end— whether in a conquest to achieve Manifest Destiny or by using Navajo code talkers in World War II. Another main problem with the portrayal of Native Americans in the classroom is that Natives are generalized. Native Americans are often referred to as a homogeneous group of people. By grouping all the diverse tribes into one type of Indian, it can confuse Native children. If they don’t fit the “ideal” bareback riding, teepee living, headdress wearing stereotypical Indian, they might not believe that they are authentic Indians. These identity conflicts lead to low self-esteem (Pewewardy, 2006). “Subjective feelings, such as inferiority, are an integral part of consciousness and work together with the objective reality of poverty and deprivation to shape a young person’s worldview. Schools should be places where students come to unlearn negative stereotypes...” (Reyhner, 2006).

The last problem that we would like to address is who is educating Native American children. There is a general lack of minority teachers and an even smaller number of Indian teachers (Feistritzer, 2011). Even when EuroAmericans attempt to understand Native American students, they will never be able to fully process what it means to be a Native American. In a blog post by Teach for America, a EuroAmerican teacher was describing her experiences teaching on a Native reservation. She grew up in South Dakota and believed

she had a solid understanding of Indians and their culture. Often in class, she would try to incorporate Lakota culture into the classroom because she taught at a school on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation where much of the population belongs to the Lakota tribe. However, when one student was being difficult, this teacher told the student that he was "not being a leader" and that he "was not following the Lakota virtues." This student responded, "stop using my culture against me." Although this teacher meant the best and was trying to be culturally responsible, there is no way that she as a EuroAmerican woman, could fully understand the struggles of the Natives on the reservation (Hurst, 2012).

According to research done by Emily Feistritzer for the National Center for Education Information, in 2011, 17% of teachers are of minority descent. More specifically, 7% of teachers are Black, 6% are Hispanic, and 4% are "other." "Other" encompasses a variety of ethnicities and clearly there are a small percentage of Native teachers (Feistritzer, 2011). In order to become a teacher, you need a bachelor's degree and many states have additional requirements. Because a larger number of Indian students drop out of high school, fewer Native Americans qualify to be teachers.

We believe that the best way to solve this problem is to require teachers to have a strong anthropological and historical foundation of the diverse groups of students they may encounter. Although it may not be realistic to have every teacher take an in-depth class about teaching Native Americans, we feel that there should be an emphasis on respecting diversity in the classroom. Often, teachers are unaware that they are misrepresenting a group of people. Teachers must be educated or they will misinform their students and perpetuate this cycle of negative stereotypes. For example, in another Teach for America blog post, a parent was concerned about her son singing "10 Little Indians."

When she discussed her feelings with her son's teacher, she wrote how the teacher seemed "very partial to her version of the Thanksgiving story, one that she likely was raised with" (Mitchell, 2013). Many of these teachers do not mean harm, but by acknowledging Native Americans, once a year, by making feather headbands is very harmful to the representation of Native Americans.

Teachers should embrace the influence of culture both inside and outside the classroom. The U.S. Secretary of Education's Indian Nations at Risk Task Force found that "schools that respect and support a student's language and culture are significantly more successful in educating those students" (Reyhner, 2006). Schools should "give education a multicultural focus to eliminate racism and promote understanding among all races" (Reyhner, 2006). Those who teach Native students need an understanding of anthropology, sociology, and history so they better understand the history of Native Americans and their culture.

In conclusion, teachers need to understand the background and meaning of concepts such as ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, assimilation, and acculturation. Understanding the historical background of Native education will help teachers understand which practices are effective and which practices are not. When possible, teachers should adjust their curriculum to reflect the cultures of Native students because this can help create meaning for students who often do not see schoolwork as meaningful. Furthermore, teachers should use supplemental materials and not rely heavily on textbooks because textbooks often miss significant points in history or tell stories from a dominant culture point of view. As we've pointed out earlier, certain teaching resources objectify Indians and teachers need to ensure the materials they use are culturally appropriate. Not only would

these practices enable the success of Native children in the classroom, it would help non-native students to better understand their Native classmates—that they are not savage people of the past, but contemporary people part of modern society.

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